

Observations on the Occurrence of the Weddell Seal in New Zealand

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Abstract.

Four occurrences of the Weddell seal in New Zealand are recorded, all in winter or early spring. A summary of these and several records from other localities is given, indicating that young animals in their first year have a marked tendency to appear as strays.

Bertram (1940) refers to a private communication in which R. A. Falla states that the Weddell seal, *Leptonychotes weddelli* (Lesson), is sometimes seen as a stray on the New Zealand coast. This seal is non-migratory and is rarely seen at any distance from the Antarctic coastline or on drifting ice, but strays have been recorded from the east coast of Patagonia in 1833, Juan Fernandez, Kerguelen and Heard Islands, and the Falkland Islands (Wilson, 1907; Bertram, 1940; Hamilton, 1945), and from Encounter Bay, South Australia (Wood Jones, 1925).

This note records four occurrences in New Zealand, including that of a specimen recently found ashore on Muriwai Beach, near Auckland.

Hector's identification (1893) of a seal from outside Wanganui Heads in the Wanganui Public Museum as *Leptonychotes weddelli* is referred to in most accounts of the Weddell seal, but Oliver (1921) found this specimen to be a crabeater, *Lobodon carcinophagus* (Jacquinot and Pucheran). Hector's record is given by Bertram (1940) in a quotation from Wilson's National Antarctic Expedition report (1907).

There is a correctly determined mounted skin of this species, with the skull included, in the Dominion Museum, Wellington. This seal, a male, was collected on 26th June, 1926, in Titali Bay, on the west coast eleven miles north of Wellington. I am grateful to Dr. R. A. Falla, Director of the Dominion Museum, for permission to record the specimen.

Dr. Oliver has kindly given me the following notes taken on this specimen in the flesh: teeth $\frac{2}{2} \frac{1}{1} \frac{5}{5}$; colour, above brown with longitudinal spots of buff, the brown on the sides behind the flippers darker; below buff with irregular markings of light brown; head brown above, buff below, the neck buff mottled with brown. Total length, including the hind flippers, 60 inches (153 cm.).

The total length of the mounted specimen, measured from snout to tip of tail, is 52 inches (132 cm.).

Dr. Oliver has also supplied information about a Weddell seal which came into Wellington Harbour on 29th June, 1937. This animal, which had been injured, probably by a shark or killer whale, was approximately six feet long, and as shown by a photograph which I have examined was

in particularly good condition. It was seen again at Napier four days later, both Wellington and Napier visits being described in press accounts in the Wellington "Dominion" of 30th June and 6th July, 1937.

I am indebted to Mr. C. A. Fleming for a third record of a Weddell seal, which was seen ashore on Enderby Island, the northernmost member of the Auckland group, on 26th September, 1942. Mr. Fleming has a photograph of this seal, which from some distance appeared to be approximately seven feet in length.

The fourth record is that of a seal found on the ocean beach at Muriwai, twenty miles west of Auckland, by Messrs. R. M. Cassie and A. H. Taylor, of the Marine Department, and D. and G. McKenzie, on 4th August, 1948. It had been injured by a rifle shot and died four days later at the Auckland Zoological Park.

This specimen, now mounted in the Auckland Museum collection (MAMM. 43.1), is a young male. The coat is dark grey above, paler grey with white mottling on the sides and yellowish white below; the tail has a well marked white border. Total length from snout to tip of tail, measured in the flesh: 68 inches (173 cm.).

The following bones have been preserved separately: skull (Plate 69), total length (occipital condyle to tip of premaxillae), 234 mm.; maximum zygomatic width (outside), 143 mm. Os penis, length 83.5 mm.

The pupping season of the Weddell seal in the Ross Sea is at its height in the third week of October, all the young being born within a period of four to five weeks (Bertram, 1940). By August, young born the previous year would thus be between nine and ten months old. The body and skull measurements of the Auckland Museum specimen fall within the range of nine-ten months old Weddell seals given by Bertram. According to body length, the three remaining seals would also be young still in their first year, although the lengths are only estimates in the case of the two field records.

It may be noted that the skeleton from Betsy Cove, Kerguelen, described in detail by Turner (1888) is that of a young seal, believed to be a female, shot on 9th January, 1874. Although probably some months older, this specimen proves to have been almost identical in size with the Muriwai specimen, the measurements given by Turner being: skull length 237 mm.; interzygomatic width 142 mm. Bertram's measurements of material from Graham Land show that young seals of different age groups may vary markedly in size. In addition, it may be possible that the seal from Kerguelen had come from a later-breeding colony than the Auckland specimen.

The specimen from Encounter Bay referred to by Wood Jones (1925) is displayed in the South Australian Museum, Adelaide. I am indebted to Mr. H. M. Hale for the information that this is a young male seal, five feet in total length, taken on 17th April, 1913.

Gray (1866) lists the two specimens in the British Museum from the River Santa Cruz, on the east coast of Patagonia, as adults. Hamilton's record from the Falkland Islands (1945) is that of a Wed-

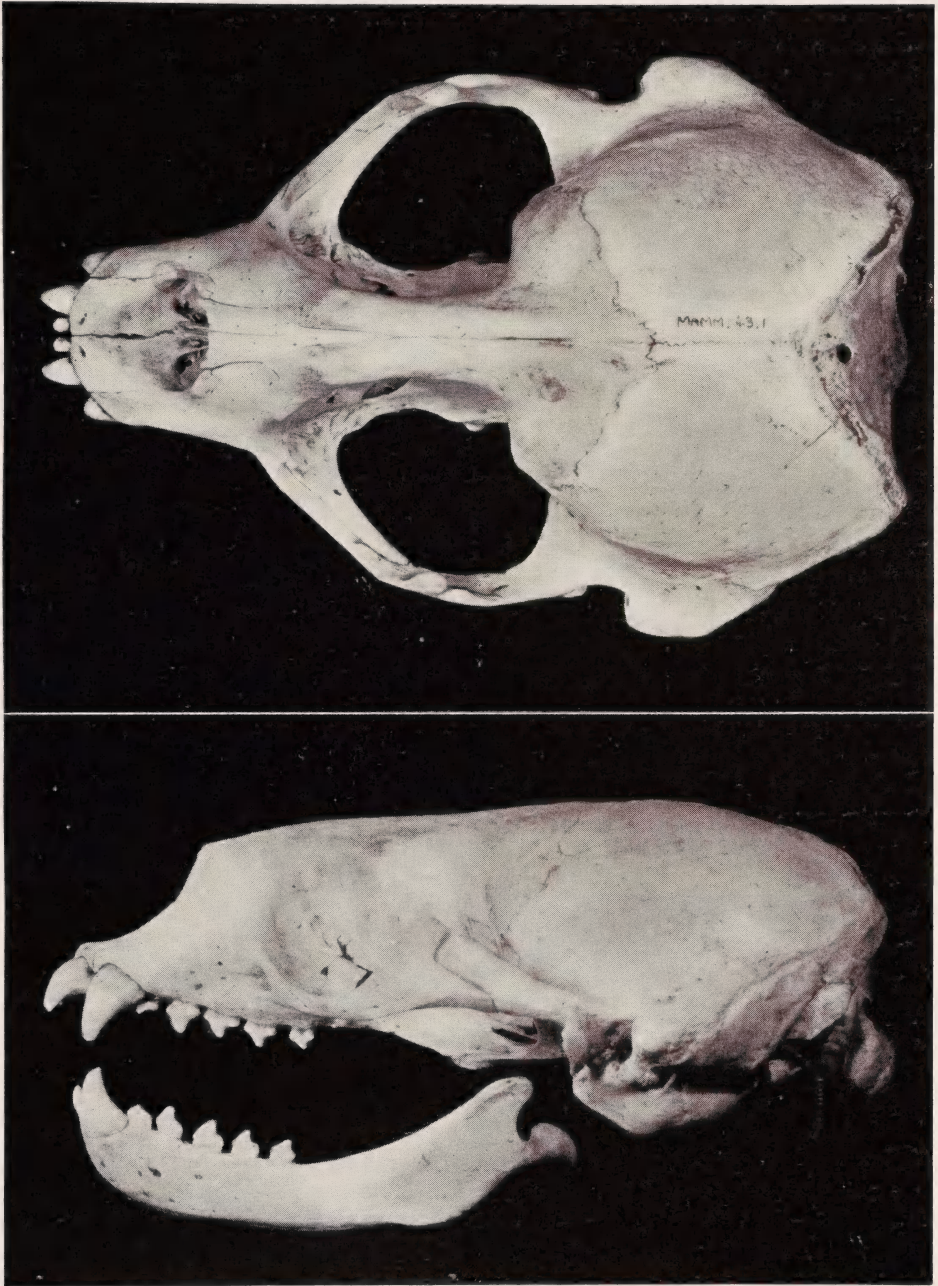
dell seal about six feet long observed on 28th October, 1943. The estimated length suggests that this also was a young animal under one year old.

Interest is attached to young Weddell seals as strays, for according to Bertram very little is seen of the young after they take to the water until they reach breeding age, in the case of the females during their third year. It is presumed that the young seals spend most of their time in the water feeding, but there is also some suggestion in the records from several localities given above that they have a greater tendency than the adults to move away from coastal waters.

It is noteworthy also that the New Zealand occurrences have all been in winter or early spring, as might be expected if the seals had strayed northwards in summer, possibly drifting on ice which would break up in autumn.

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Skull of Weddell seal (Auckland Museum 43.1) from Muriwai Beach;
(above) dorsal and (below) lateral views.